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# Nietzsche on Redemption. A Mahayana Buddhist Perspective

André van der Braak

Nietzsche often comments that he uses his “trans-European” or even “trans-Asiatic” eye to criticize and enhance his own European culture (see for example JGB 56). He can therefore be considered a transcultural thinker,<sup>1</sup> who confronts European and non-European perspectives with each other in order to go beyond cultural assumptions and limitations. One of those confrontations has been between Christianity and Buddhism.

Throughout his work, Nietzsche rejected (early) Buddhism as a life-denying, nihilistic response to the problem of suffering, the opposite of his own Dionysian, affirmative philosophy. Nietzsche wrote in his Nachlass “Ich könnte der Buddha Europas werden”, and continues with “was freilich ein Gegenstück zum indischen wäre” (KSA 10.4[2]).<sup>2</sup>

Earlier studies have viewed Nietzsche’s thought from the perspective of early Buddhism<sup>3</sup> and have revealed some interesting elective affinities. Mistry and Morrison also hint at possible ways in which Nietzsche was influenced by his knowledge of Buddhism.

However, the later Mahayana Buddhism (that Nietzsche wasn’t acquainted with himself), is according to Graham Parkes a much more promising candidate for comparative research. Nietzsche might have considered the Mahayana Buddhist philosophical ideas much to his own

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1 Johann Figl, *Nietzsche und die Religionen: Transkulturelle Perspektiven seines Bildungs- und Denkweges*, Berlin/New York 2007; André van der Braak, Nietzsche’s Transcultural Hermeneutics: Proliferation versus Fusion of Horizons, in: Francisco Arenas-Dolz, Luca Giancristofaro, Paolo Stellini (eds.), *Nietzsche y la Hermenéutica*, Valencia 2007, pp. 79–88.

2 For an overview of Nietzsche’s use of the term “Buddhismus”, see my article in Paul van Tongeren, Gerd Schank, Herman Siemens (eds.), *Nietzsche-Wörterbuch*, Bd. 1: *Abbreuiatur-einfach*, Berlin/New York 2004, pp. 419–433.

3 Freny Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism: Prolegomenon to a Comparative Study*, Berlin/New York 1981; Robert Morrison, *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities*, Oxford 1997.

taste.<sup>4</sup> This essay will therefore use Mahayana Buddhism as an interpretative lens to view Nietzsche's thought, particularly with respect to redemption.

The past years have seen a renewed interest in Nietzsche as a soteriological thinker, for whom the concept of redemption plays an important role.<sup>5</sup> Throughout Nietzsche's work, a perplexing range of perspectives on this subject can be found. Contrary to what one might expect, Nietzsche uses the term not only in a negative sense. In various places, but especially in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, he attempts to elucidate a new and positive form of redemption.<sup>6</sup> After presenting Nietzsche's perspectives on redemption, this essay will present a Mahayana Buddhist view on redemption, in order to suggest a possible interpretation of Nietzsche's views on redemption.

### Nietzsche on redemption

Nietzsche mostly speaks about redemption as a criticized theological concept, as part of his battle against Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche's critique is first of all a psychological one. Starting with *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, and continuing into the later work, Nietzsche exposes the false psychology of redemption. He attempts to give a non-mythological and purely psychological explanation for the need for redemption (MA I 132): it is based on fantasy and fiction (MA I 135, 476). He also explains the feeling of redemption as an interpretation of well being (KSA 11.44[6]). Redemption is connected with the idea of sin, which Nietzsche criticizes as an imaginary concept (KSA 9.5[33], KSA 9.7[251]).

Also the state of redemption itself is unmasked by Nietzsche as imaginary: he rejects it as an illusion (FW 335), an imaginary "Wirkung

4 Graham Parkes (ed.), *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*, Chicago 1991, p. 15.

5 Gilles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche. On the Piety of Unbelief*, London 2002; André van der Braak, *Hoe men wordt, wat men is: zelfvervolmaking, zelfoverwinning en zelfvergetelheid bij Nietzsche*, Budel 2004.

6 See my forthcoming article on "Erlösung" in Paul van Tongeren, Gerd Schank, Herman Siemens (eds.), *Nietzsche-Wörterbuch*, Bd. 2, Berlin/New York 2008 (forthcoming).

7 During his early period (GT through UB), Nietzsche uses redemption to describe an artistic and metaphysical phenomenon. Since this meaning of redemption is influenced by Wagner and Schopenhauer, and quite specific to the early work, I will not focus on it in this essay.

und Verwandlung" (KSA 9.4[89], AC 15), as "Lüge und Falschmünzerei" (AC 38), and as a psychological reality based on the imagination (KSA 13.11[383], AC 33).

Later on, Nietzsche's psychological critique is joined by a genealogical critique. Redemption is viewed as an expression of resentment. Through its connection with sin, redemption serves to stimulate submission to the priests (AC 26). It also serves to condemn life (MA I 16, KSA 13.11[265], KSA 13.14[89]). Within the ascetic ideal, redemption functions as a reward for suffering: by suffering here on earth one can experience redemption in the afterlife. As Nietzsche analyzes in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, the ascetic priest develops a new way to deal with suffering by reinterpreting it as sin, and redirecting resentment within. The notions of sin and redemption point the blame for suffering back at the sufferer. Suffering is reinterpreted as a necessary pathway to redemption. By giving this meaning to suffering, it is made bearable. For the priests, resentment came to be built into the very fabric of redemption. They developed a theology of guilt, sin and redemption, which allowed them to be the mediators of a complex mechanism of reward and punishment. Redemption became an instrument of violence and revenge.

In his late work, Nietzsche's psychological and genealogical critique is joined by a physiological critique: the need for redemption is a sign of decadence (WA Nachschrift 1). Redemption is claimed to be a cure but in reality, it makes the patient even more ill. The Christian *Buss-und Erlösungstraining* leads to epileptic symptoms (GM III 21) and to *Erlösungs-Hysterie* (EH Schicksal). As a "*Systematisierung des Zerstörer-Instinkt*" (KSA 13.14[164]), redemption is a symptom of a morality of decadence (KSA 13.14[210]). For Nietzsche, Christian redemption doesn't liberate and heal people, it reinforces their bondage.

For the late Nietzsche, redemption is connected with nihilism. According to Nietzsche, both Christianity and Buddhism define redemption as the absence of pain and suffering. The state of redemption is one of total "*Gesamt-Hypnotisierung und Stille*" (GM III 17), a state of deep sleep, whether interpreted as becoming one with Brahman, or as a *unio mystica* with God (GM III 17). Redemption becomes synonymous with "nothing" (AC 7).

## Redemption in a positive sense

But interestingly enough, for every type of criticism of redemption, Nietzsche hints at a positive counterpart, to be contrasted with the negative redemption.

When he speaks about redemption as part of Christian morality, he envisages self-liberation (*Selbsterlösung*) as an emancipation from the need for redemption (MA 134). Realizing that “everything is necessity” can liberate the free spirit from his (imaginary) sense of sinfulness and guilt, and his need for redemption of this sinfulness (MA 107).<sup>8</sup> A redeemer becomes superfluous, just like in the time of the Buddha, the teacher of the religion of *Selbsterlösung* (M 96). By un-learning the moral prejudices, the free spirit can liberate himself from the greatest illness of humanity: Christian morality (KSA 9.4[315]).<sup>9</sup> By denying the truth of moral judgments, the free spirit is also “von der Skepsis erlöst” (M 477). He is now free to deny again, rather than having to suspend his judgment.<sup>10</sup>

When Nietzsche speaks about redemption as part and parcel of nihilism, he speaks about the self-overcoming of nihilism. Just like Nietzsche analyzes Christian redemption in physiological terms as a sickness born out of decadence, he speaks about positive redemption in medical terms: as being cured from decadence and the sickening effects of Christian redemption.

In “Von der Erlösung”, Zarathustra speaks about redemption first of all as a creative reinterpretation of the past, in order to justify it. “Die Vergangenen zu erlösen und alle ‘Es war’ umzuschaffen in ein ‘so wollte ich es!’—das hiesse mir erst Erlösung!” (Z II Erlösung). But then the will discovers that it is powerless to change the past. It becomes infected with the spirit of revenge. Redemption now refers to a liberation from the world of appearances (“Erlösung vom Fluss der Dinge”, Z II Erlösung), which culminates in not willing anymore: “Es sei denn, dass der Wille endlich sich selber erlöste und Wollen zu Nicht-Wollen würde— doch ihr kennt, meine Brüder, diess Fabellied des Wahnsinns!” (Z II Erlösung).

The will can only be truly liberated—and liberating—when it is healed from revenge. True redemption would therefore amount to a cure

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8 See Marco Brusotti, *Die Leidenschaft der Erkenntnis: Philosophie und ästhetische Lebensgestaltung bei Nietzsche von Morgenröthe bis Also sprach Zarathustra*, Berlin/New York 1997, p. 11.

9 See *ibid.*, p. 109.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 303.

from revenge. It can be viewed as the extreme self-overcoming of the will to power.<sup>11</sup> The will to power has to learn to will the eternal recurrence.<sup>12</sup> Such a redemption of the will is, according to Brusotti, the final goal of Nietzsche's philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

But how are we to think such a redemption of the will? What would the self-overcoming of the will to power look like? In order to be consistent with Nietzsche's thought as a whole, redemption can't refer to a particular state or resolution of conflict, nor can it consist of filling a lack. Such a redemption would, according to Nietzsche, be a symptom of degenerated, reactive life. The very attempt to overcome the ascetic ideal would then, ironically enough, be a symptom of that ascetic ideal itself. Redemption can't be a synthesis of opposites or extinguishing struggle and conflict.

A second problematic aspect of any Nietzschean soteriology is that it can't be interpreted as a teleological imperative. It can't be grasped as a means to arrive at some end projected in the future. Nietzsche criticizes any ideal of conscious self-cultivation and self-overcoming as an expression of decadence and resentment. From the healthy affirmative, Dionysian point of view everything is perfect as it is, and nothing needs to be changed or improved.

With these questions in mind, let us now turn to the philosophical tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, and its views on redemption.

## Redemption in Mahayana Buddhism

In early Buddhism, redemption (nirvana) is consistently interpreted as the cessation of suffering, a state of liberation from worldly existence (samsara) that can be reached through a practice of self-cultivation and meditation. True to their radical empiricist and anti-metaphysical stance, the early Buddhist texts offer hardly any explicit positive indications of what nirvana is, only what it is not. This reticence to give a positive determination to nirvana has caused nineteenth-century interpreters of

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11 Ibid., p. 574.

12 Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of "Thus Spake Zarathustra"*, New Haven 1986, p. 147.

13 Brusotti, *Die Leidenschaft*, p. 571.

Buddhism (including Nietzsche) to misinterpret nirvana as a “will to nothingness”.<sup>14</sup>

The later Mahayana Buddhism, however, approaches nirvana in a much more multi-perspectival way. It uses the notion of “expedient means” (Sk. *upāya*), to allow for the possibility of different layers of teaching. Some perspectives are more exoteric, aimed at a large audience, and others are more esoteric, not in the sense of ‘secret’, but for those further along the Buddhist path.

One of the more esoteric teachings is that of the nondual relationship between nirvana and samsara. In the famous formulation of the second-century Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna: “The limits (i.e. realm) of nirvana are the limits of samsara. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever.”<sup>15</sup> Nirvana doesn’t refer to escaping or overcoming samsara in order to reach a state of everlasting bliss (analogous to the Christian notion of redemption). It means moving beyond the exoteric perspective on nirvana as a state separate from samsara, and realizing the esoteric perspective that there is no difference between samsara and nirvana. As Jay Garfield puts it, this is “a nirvana not found in an escape from the world but in an enlightened and awakened engagement with it.”<sup>16</sup> Nirvana implies a different, more affirmative perspective on living in *this* world. The early Buddhist notion of nirvana as a liberation from samsara is not considered wrong or untrue, but is seen as a preliminary perspective for those starting out on the Buddhist path. Once one has progressed on the path, one is ready for the more advanced nondual perspective that nirvana and samsara are the same.

In contemporary Japanese Mahayana Buddhism, nirvana is interpreted as a “dynamic dialectic of reaffirmation through double negation”.<sup>17</sup> The first negation is the ascetic overcoming of the craving and ignorance that bind us. This could be likened to the nihilistic view of nirvana as an escape from samsara. However, this negation has to be followed up by an equally necessary second negation: a negation of any

14 See Roger Pol-Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness. The Philosophers and the Buddha*, North Carolina 2003.

15 Kenneth Inada, *Nagarjuna. A Translation of his Mulamadhyamakakarika with an Introductory Essay*, Delhi 1993, p. 158.

16 Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Oxford 1995, p. 341.

17 Bret Davis, Zen After Zarathustra: The Problem of the Will in the Confrontation Between Nietzsche and Buddhism, in: *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 28 (2004), pp. 89–138, here p. 99.

attachment to a transcendent repose in the realm of nirvana. As Davis puts it: "The event of nirvana thus paradoxically completes itself only in a movement through its own negation."<sup>18</sup> Any dualistic perspectives on nirvana, as a state separate from and superior to samsara, have to be overcome, and a nondualistic perspective on nirvana needs to be realized.

Such a multilayered perspectival approach to redemption could perhaps also fruitfully be applied to Nietzsche's views on redemption. Nietzsche himself uses the famous image of the three transformations of the spirit: the camel, the lion and the child (Z I Verwandlungen). The camel seeks truth and liberation from within his own cultural tradition. He voluntarily takes on the heaviest burdens, and subjects himself to the norms and values of that tradition (i.e., Christian redemption). Eventually, he will end up in the desert, where he has to fight the dragon of the "thou shalt". If his *Selbsterlösung* is victorious, he transforms into an autonomous lion, who says "I will", rather than "thou shalt". The lion is able to give himself his own laws as a sovereign individual, "philosophize with the hammer", and destroy the established values of his culture. He is however still driven by revenge, and therefore not capable of creating new values. By going under, voluntarily giving up the power of the "I will", the lion is transformed into a child.

The Mahayanistic "dynamic dialectic of reaffirmation through double negation" can be used to interpret the camel-lion-child transformations. The first negation (nirvana as a liberation from samsara) can be likened to the camel who seeks to become master over himself. Striving after redemption under the yoke of Christian morality, the camel can use the notion of will to power to liberate himself from this false notion of redemption and transform into a lion (*Selbsterlösung*). The lion however, has to be liberated from this *Selbsterlösung* as well. This is the second negation: the notion of will to power itself has to be left behind, in order to make room for a dynamic reaffirmation of existence just as it is (*amor fati*). For this to occur, the will to power has to overcome itself.

Nietzsche's Nachlass contains the following intriguing fragment:

**Exoterisch—esoterisch**

- 1.—alles ist Wille gegen Willen
- 2 Es giebt gar keinen Willen
- 1 Causalismus
- 2 Es giebt nichts wie Ursache-Wirkung (KSA 12.5[9])

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18 Ibid.



One way to interpret this fragment is that Nietzsche intended his thesis of the will to power as an exoteric, preliminary teaching, a useful tool on the way to redemption. Camels can use the will to power as a counter-perspective that will help them to liberate themselves from the “thou shalt” of their culture. Lions can use the will to power as the hammer to philosophize with: smashing the idols of their culture in a practice of active nihilism. But eventually the will to power has to be recognized as an exoteric perspective. From an esoteric perspective (viewed from above, as Nietzsche explains in JGB 30), “es giebt gar keinen Willen”. The very notion of “will” must ultimately been seen through as illusory.

Some researchers have interpreted Nietzsche’s philosophy as an anti-soteriology, aimed at maximizing the struggle without any redemption whatsoever, a maximization rather than a self-overcoming of the will to power.<sup>19</sup> In our interpretation, will to power becomes a differential concept that functions differently for different types of people. For camels, it would serve to lessen confidence in Christian morality. For lions, it would express the sense of sovereignty and autonomy, the “I will” of the lion. Maximizing the will to power would be a lion-stage teaching, whereas the self-overcoming of the will to power would represent the transformation of lion into child.

As Davis also notes, on one hand will to power can be interpreted as Nietzsche’s inversion of the nihilistic redemptive notion of will-lessness that dominates Christianity (and Buddhism, in Nietzsche’s view): rather than to be extinguished, the will needs to be maximized. But it would be inconsistent for Nietzsche to stop at a mere countermovement, a mere “anti”. Perhaps then, just like, as Heidegger said, Nietzsche’s *Umdrehung* of Platonism turned into a *Herausdrehung*, “so too he would move beyond *both* the simple denial *and* the simple affirmation of the will to power”.<sup>20</sup> This would be a fine example of “the dynamic dialectic of reaffirmation through double negation”. First the will to power serves as a counter-notion in order to negate the ideal of will-lessness; then the notion of will to power itself has to be overcome as well. As an exoteric conviction, it has outlived its usefulness.

Nietzsche himself wrote that after Zarathustra, all his writings were fish hooks (EH JGB 1): books for camels that he hoped to lure into the

19 E. g. Paul van Tongeren, *Reinterpreting Modern Culture: An Introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche’s Philosophy*, Lafayette 2004.

20 Davis, *Zen After Zarathustra*, p. 115.

desert. The convictions expressed in those books should be read as exoteric teachings, aimed at educating his audience.

A similar spirit can be discerned in the writings of Mahayana Buddhism. Whereas early Buddhism is more austere and skeptical in its philosophical views, Mahayana Buddhism is “von der Skepsis erlöst”, just like Nietzsche in M 477. Like Zarathustra, Mahayana Buddhism has embraced the great skepticism, that allows one to play with convictions (AC 54). Its multi-perspectival notion of nirvana can therefore be a useful hermeneutic tool for interpreting Nietzsche’s views on redemption.

